



The Tangled Wing: Biological Constraints on the Human Spirit

Melvin Konner

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A vital updating of a seminal work of science

First published to great acclaim twenty years ago, *The Tangled Wing* has become required reading for anyone interested in the biological roots of human behavior. Since then, revolutions have taken place in genetics, molecular biology, and neuroscience. All of these innovations have been brought into account in this greatly expanded edition of a book originally called an "overwhelming achievement" by *The Times Literary Supplement*.

A masterful synthesis of biology, psychology, anthropology, and philosophy, *The Tangled Wing* reveals human identity and activity to be an intricately woven fabric of innumerable factors. Melvin Konner's sensitive and straightforward discussion ranges across topics such as the roots of aggression, the basis of attachment and desire, the differences between the sexes, and the foundations of mental illness.

The Tangled Wing: Biological Constraints on the Human Spirit Details

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Author : Melvin Konner

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Ron says

Konnor is an MD who focused on neurology and ended up teaching anthropology. He wrote this insightful book over 20 years ago and was so accurate in his assessment of human nature that the anniversary edition featured here saw little change to the text but for a few updates based on new archeological finds. Essential reading for students of human nature.

Claire DeVore says

This book made me realized I had wasted money on my degree in Zoology with a focus on Evolutionary Biology. It should be a standard text in all related fields. It's also well written and accessible!! Important science shouldn't be a mind field of pontification. But Dr. Konner, also a poet, spins stories that explain the intricacies of Ecology, Behavioral Biology and Neurobiology as if you're listening to a best friend. A PhD from Harvard studying the !Kung San and MD, Dr. Konner is an undervalued Renaissance man. Not to belabor the point but I really feel it encapsulated my University studies (Washington University of St Louis, University of Sussex and University of Washington) read, give as a gift, Enjoy!!!!

Patrick says

A good book to explain the biological basis of behavior and passions in humanity.

Amanda says

Evolution and Human Nature Hoscho class fall 2016

Steven Peterson says

An interesting (albeit a bit uneven) effort to explain human behavior through a Darwinian prism.

Paul says

An astute examination of the biology of human behavior.

Peter Flom says

An outstanding look at human nature from an author who is not only learned but wise.

Cheryl says

I read what I could, this book was difficult for me. Left it with my friend Vicki when I went to Virginia this summer. This was just before I was diagnosed with Multiple Myeloma, but I don't think it would have made a difference had I been already diagnosed. The book was on the reading list for my grad school class last fall; unfortunately the course of my disease has made it necessary to pull out of grad school and devote myself to healing. Perhaps when I feel better I will give it another go, perhaps not.

Rob says

One of Nate Hagen's favorite books.

Nicole says

A book I managed to read in college and have since recommended to many. Konner is a good writer and covers his field well. I want to read the revised edition soon.

Bob Nichols says

Konner's book (2nd edition) is a solid defense of the thesis that humans are animals and that human (biological) nature exists. Konner's long book has numerous highlights, including: (1) our biological makeup (DNA, molecules) contains information about the environment that helps us resist dissipation (disorder); (2) the goal of the struggle in Darwin's theory is not life, but reproductive success; (3) following Gould, the body possesses certain non-functional architecture (so long as it does not detract from survival), and that adaptive functions for one purpose are used for other purposes; (4) biological nature exists within a range of expression, depending on environmental situations; (5) we have an integrated reptilian, paleomammalian, and new mammalian brain (i.e., we are most certainly part reptile); (6) following Demasio, Konner describes brain-damaged victims who know but do not feel the meaning-significance-relevance-value of what they know; (7) there's no "I" in a central place within the brain (leaving open the question of whether we have a biological core or an individualized nature?); and (8) like animals, we are mostly aware in the sense that we have integrated, global attention as opposed to a philosopher's consciousness (aware of what we do and why).

Konner's strength is detail, but it's also the book's weakness. Konner's facts are extensive, but mind-numbing. It is too, too easy to get lost in the details and one cries out for more theory that pulls it all together and

tells us what actually makes us tick (move). We have biological being on the one hand, and our challenging environment on the other. This is the history of human evolution. Konner does not draw out the implications of this critical relationship between internal need and external object/objective that addresses that need. We have emotions and we have mind, but Konner also does not draw out the significance of emotion (pre-cognitive regulation of the body's relationship with the external world) and the essential role emotions play in providing value and meaning for cognition. As so much of modern thought is biased against "emotion-free," objective thought, far more could have been discussed on this topic. Konner's chapter on change - what is universal in humans and what is variable - is superficial and disappointing. By implication, his discussion acknowledges a clear issue for evolutionary theory (nature versus nurture), but it adds nothing new to enlighten us. Throughout his book, Konner weaves in literary and poetic references that may soften the book's texture for some, but may strike others as out of place or as a distraction.

When assessing the prospects for the future, Konner quotes C.H. Waddington's plea that we need to develop an ethical system that supports life and the good. Waddington believes ethical axioms can be drawn from the various religions of humankind such as respect for self, respect for others, etc. This is nothing but a repeat of philosophical and ethical pleadings seen throughout the ages. Inspired by E.O. Wilson's biophilia (love of life) thesis, Konner says we must choose for "the evolution of the human spirit." But his is all empty stuff, assertions of "should and ought." The real question is why should we respect others, and why we, in fact, so frequently don't. Evolutionary theory provides insights if not outright answers to both questions. The task then becomes one of designing social, ethical and political systems that rest on this foundation of biological truth.
